

SSID

Briefing Paper School Resource Officers

“A school resource officer is a career law enforcement officer, with sworn authority, deployed in community-oriented policing and assigned by the employing police department or agency to work in collaboration with school and community-based organizations” (Title I of the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act of 1968, as amended in 1998).

Most school resource officers (SROs) are employees of municipal or county police agencies who are permanently assigned to one or more schools. Known also as “School Safety Officers,” “Community Outreach Officers,” and “School Liaison Officers,” SROs are not synonymous with school security or school police departments because of their multifaceted teaching and advisory capabilities.

Many authors trace the origin of SROs to Flint, Michigan in the 1950s (Bond, 2001; Mulqueen, 2001). However, most SRO programs were established in the 1990s after an increase in school violence precipitated increased federal funding of SROs (Kennedy, 2001). As Figure 1 illustrates, SROs are employed by a majority of local police departments serving 25,000 or more residents and sheriffs’ offices serving 100,000 or more residents. In 1999, there were 9,130 SROs employed by local police departments and 3,447 SROs employed by sheriffs’ offices throughout the United States.

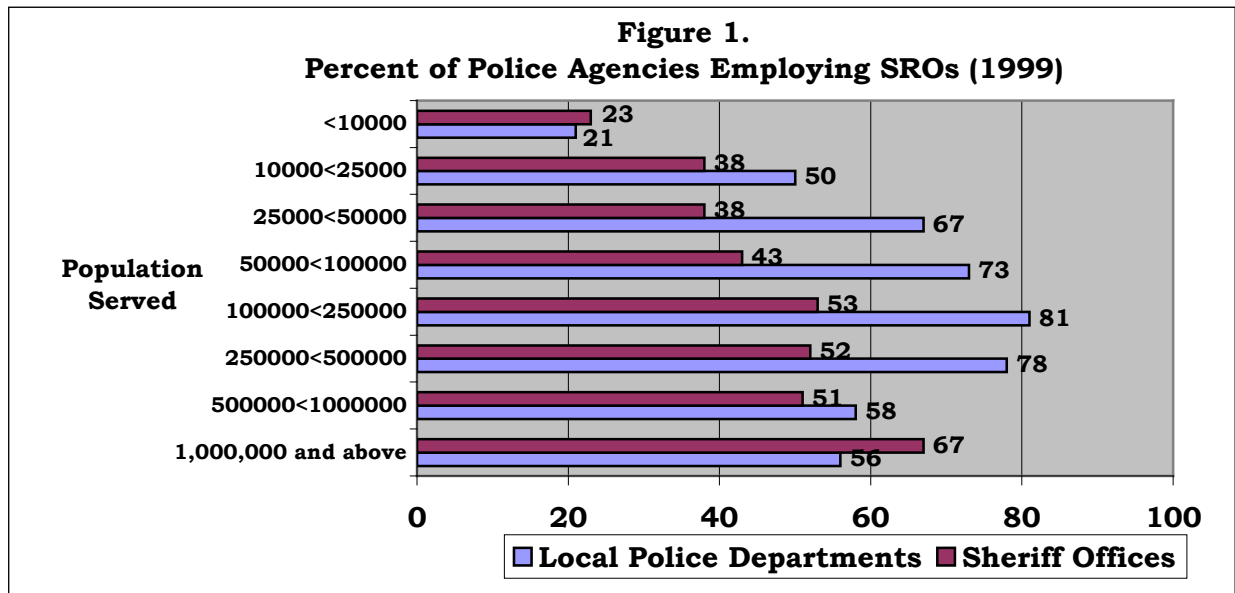


Figure 1 Sources: Hickman, M. J. & Reaves, B. Local Police Departments 1999, Bureau of Justice Statistics, May 2001; Reaves, B. & Hickman, M. J. Sheriffs’ Offices 1999, Bureau of Justice Statistics, May 2001.

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Roles and Responsibilities of School Resource Officers

For maximum efficiency, the duties of SROs should supplement, not supplant, the duties of existing staff such as school security officers, teachers, and program administrators. The National Association of School Resource Officers has classified the duties of SROs within three broadly defined areas:

Law Enforcement Officers

- ◆ Participate in crime and delinquency prevention by identifying risk factors and sharing information with other law enforcement and security personnel.
- ◆ Serve as positive community policing role model.
- ◆ Enforce laws, ordinances, and policies and investigate criminal behavior.
- ◆ Provide on-site crisis/emergency response to disasters, safety threats, etc.
- ◆ Provide security at school functions.

Teachers/Administrators

- ◆ Develop safety and crime prevention programs and curricula.
- ◆ Provide classroom instruction.
- ◆ Establish partnerships with specific programs such as DARE and SAVE.
- ◆ Work closely with other components of the juvenile justice system such as probation officers (West and Fries, 1995).

Advisors

- ◆ Communicate openly with students regarding rights, responsibilities, concerns, and unacceptable behavior.
- ◆ Make referrals to community programs, social services, in-school programs, etc.
- ◆ Act as a liaison to parents, school staff, and community leaders.
- ◆ Assist in the development and implementation of school safety and crisis response plans.

Surveys conducted by the Center for the Prevention of School Violence indicate that SROs, on average, spend 50% of their time as law enforcers, 30 percent as counselors (advisors), and 20 percent as teachers/administrators. For additional information regarding the duties and responsibilities of SROs, please see: <http://www.ncsu.edu/cpsv/srojob.htm>.

Funding for School Resource Officers

The Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 authorized federal funding for SRO programs and created the Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) program, administered by the Department of Justice, to award grants to law enforcement agencies furthering community-policing initiatives. Grants for SROs are awarded through the COPS in Schools program and are limited to \$125,000 per officer over a three-year period. During the first three years of the program, more than \$420 million has been awarded to 1,800 law

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enforcement agencies to fund 3,800 SRO positions. An additional \$179 million was available in FY 2001.

The COPS program also provides funding for training and technical assistance including:

- ◆ Chief Executive Officer Safe Schools Forum
- ◆ School Resource Officer Leadership Program
- ◆ Safe Schools Interagency Team Planning Program (Girouard, 2001)

For more information on the COPS in Schools program see:

http://www.usdoj.gov/cops/gpa/grant_prog/cis/default.htm

Grants for SROs are also available from many states, including South Carolina, North Carolina, and Virginia.

The Effectiveness of School Resource Officers

Having a safe and orderly school environment is essential to creating the foundation for effective teaching, reducing threats of physical harm, and instilling positiveness and cooperation among students and staff. Such environments should be conducive to enhanced learning and academic achievement (Atkinson, 2001). Unfortunately, few, if any, studies exist that examine the correlation between SROs and academic achievement.

Sporadic survey data has found that both teachers and students perceived schools as safer following the assignment of SROs to their schools. The Center for the Prevention of School Violence indicated that 62 percent of school administrators rated hiring SROs as the most effective strategy for safe schools, and an additional 26 percent of respondents rated SROs as the second best safety approach (School Resource Officers, 2001).

A two-year longitudinal study (Justiceworks, 2001) of SROs in nine New Hampshire schools found that two-thirds of students and teachers who felt unsafe before the arrival of SROs reported feeling safer following their employment. Also, a majority of students and teachers who once held unfavorable or neutral attitudes towards SROs had favorable attitudes after their deployment. Among surveyed students, self-reported weapons possession declined by 97 percent, marijuana use at school decreased by 80 percent, fighting decreased by 71 percent, and bullying decreased by 67 percent. Teachers reported significantly lower levels of classroom disruptions, drug use, and gang activity. Overall, 86 percent of teachers believed their school's learning environment had improved as a result of SROs.

The effectiveness of SROs in Birmingham, Alabama was measured by suspension data and self-reports from both SROs and school administrators. The suspension data was analyzed for time periods before, during, and after the placement of SROs in schools, and, although limited, the data did show a slight reduction in suspensions following SRO employment. In addition, the self-reports indicated that weapons possession, gang-related activities, fighting, drug use, and disciplinary problems dropped considerably in each of the schools following the employment of an SRO (Johnson, 1999).

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Resources

- www.nasro.org – National Association of School Resource Officers
- <http://www.ncsu.edu/cpsv> – Center for the Prevention of School Violence
- <http://www.usdoj.gov/cops/home.htm> – US Department of Justice, Community Oriented Policing Services
- <http://www.safetyzone.org> – National Resource Center for Safe Schools